

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAB-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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P 282222Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6797

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 2964

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: SENV, PN
SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF DEFORESTATION IN THE CANAL ZONE

SUMMARY: SLASH-AND-BURN CLEARING OF CANAL ZONE FORESTS BY
SQUATTERS HAS INCREASED DEFORESTATION IN THE CANAL WATERSHED.
PANAMANIAN TREATY PLANNING OFFICIALS HAVE BEGUN TO TAKE A
GREATER INTEREST IN THIS PROBLEM AND TO CONSIDER WHAT THE
GOVERNMENT'S POLICY SHOULD BE TO PROTECT THE WATERSHED IN BOTH
THE SHORT AND THE LONG TERM. THEY ARE CAUGHT BETWEEN THE
POLITICAL DIFFICULTIES OF REMOVING SQUATTERS AND THE LONG-
RANGE DAMAGE WHICH CONTINUED DEFORESTATION COULD HAVE ON
CANAL OPERATIONS. END SUMMARY.

1. AMERICAN SPECIALISTS FROM A NUMBER OF AGENCIES HAVE BEEN
DISTURBED BY THE INCREASING DEFORESTATION OF THE CANAL
ZONE, AS WELL AS CONTINUED CUTTING OF WHAT LITTLE FOREST IS
LEFT IN THE CHAGRES BASIN OUTSIDE THE ZONE. THE PROBLEM IS
BY NO MEANS NEW, BUT HAS WORSENERED IN RECENT YEARS, AS
POPULATION PRESSURES AND BAD ECONOMIC CONDITIONS HAVE
PUSHED PANAMANIAN INTO SUBSISTENCE FARMING WHEREVER
THEY CAN FIND THE LAND. THE MOST CONVENIENT UNCULTI-
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VATED LAND IS IN THE ZONE, THOUGH DEFORESTATION IS
GOING ON Apace EVERYWHERE, ESPECIALLY IN THE DARIEN.
USUALLY AN INDIVIDUAL CUTS THE TREES FROM A PLOT, BURNS
THE TREES AND OTHER GROWTH, AND THEN PLANTS. HE OFTEN
ALSO BUILDS A HUT FOR HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY.

2. THE CANAL ZONE AUTHORITIES HAVE TRIED TO COMBAT

DEFORESTATION, BUT THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM, A SHORTAGE OF RANGERS AND OTHER RESOURCES, AND POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS ASSOCIATED WITH RELATIONS WITH PANAMA HAVE HAMSTRUNG THEIR EFFORTS. ZONE AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN CONSIDERING INITIATION OF A CAMPAIGN TO PUSH SQUATTERS OFF THE LAND AND DESTROY THEIR CROPS. WHEN THE PANAM-ANIAN AUTHORITIES GOT WORD OF THESE TENTATIVE PLANS, THEY EXPRESSED CONCERN; THEY HAVE SINCE BEGUN TO TAKE A GREATER INTEREST IN THE PROBLEM AT THE TREATY-PLANNING LEVEL. (THE GOVERNMENT'S NATURAL RESOURCE SPECIALISTS HAVE OF COURSE LONG HAD A GREAT INTEREST IN THIS PROBLEM.) LAST WEEK, WITH THE COOPERATION OF THE ZONE AUTHORITIES, AUGUSTO ZAMBRANO OF THE PLANNING MINISTRY, A NATIONAL GUARD OFFICER (NFI) AND OTHERS INVOLVED IN TREATY PLANNING TOOK A HELICOPTER TOUR OF MUCH OF THE ZONE. AFTER THE HELICOPTER RECONNAISSANCE THE GOVERNMENT SENT TEAMS OUT TO INTERVIEW THE SQUATTERS. THOUGH SOME SQUATTERS FLED, THE OFFICIALS MANAGED TO TALK TO 150 OF THEM -- ALL BETWEEN MADDEN DAM AND CHIVA CHIVA ROAD ON EAST BANK OF THE CANAL.

3. ZAMBRANO AND HIS COLLEAGUES WERE IMPRESSED WITH THE DEVASTATION OF THE FORESTS. AT AN INFORMAL MEETING OF PANCANAL, EMBASSY AND PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS APRIL 27, ZAMBRANO GAVE A SLIDE PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS OF THESE INVESTIGATIONS. HE ESTIMATED THAT
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SOME 200 TO 300 HECTARES OF VIRGIN TIMBERLAND WERE CUT AND BURNED WITHIN THE ZONE DURING THIS DRY SEASON (DECEMBER - APRIL). THE ARRIVAL OF THE RAINY SEASON HAS BROUGHT THIS YEAR'S NEW SETTLEMENT TO AN END, SINCE IT IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE TO BURN TREES. HE ESTIMATED THAT AT LEAST 600 SQUATTER FAMILIES ARE NOW LIVING IN THE ZONE.

4. ZAMBRANO TOLD THE MEETING THAT HE AND OTHERS IN THE PLANNING GROUP WERE FORMULATING PLANS FOR PREVENTION OF FURTHER DETERIORATION OF THE CANAL WATERSHED. THEY WILL BE PRESENTING THEIR PLANS SOON TO HIGHER PANAM-ANIAN GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES. HE SAID THAT TENTATIVELY HIS GROUP IS INCLINED TO OPPOSE ANY ACTION AGAINST THE SQUATTERS UNTIL SEPTEMBER OR OCTOBER. THIS WOULD GIVE THE SQUATTERS ALREADY IN PLACE TIME TO HARVEST THEIR CROPS AND WOULD GIVE THE PANAMANIAN AUTHORITIES TIME TO WORK OUT SOME ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT FOR THE SQUATTERS. HE SAID HE HOPES THAT BY LATE 1978 AN AID LOAN FOR WATERSHED MANAGEMENT WOULD BE AVAILABLE. (COMMENT: USAID INFORMS US THAT THE LOAN IS NOT SCHEDULED TO BE READY THAT EARLY.) IF A PROGRAM

OF WATERSHED MANAGEMENT IS IMPLEMENTED, IT WOULD OFFER
EMPLOYMENT TO A GOOD MANY OF THE SQUATTERS, HE SAID,
ALLOWING THEIR REMOVAL FROM THEIR PLOTS.
NOTE BY OC/T: STADIS CAPTION DELETED PER PANAMA 3036

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
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P 282222Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6798

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PANAMA 2964

5. IN A CONVERSATION WITH THE POLITICAL COUNSELOR,
ZAMBRANO SAID THAT GOVERNMENT THINKING NOW IS TO BEGIN
STRICT ENFORCEMENT OF A NO-CUTTING POLICY LATE THIS
YEAR. SQUATTERS ALREADY IN PLACE WOULD BE PROVIDED JOBS, BUT
JOBS WOULD NOT BE PROVIDED TO FUTURE SQUATTERS WHO WOULD SIMPLY
BE EVICTED. HE CAUTIONED THAT THIS WAS STILL PRELIMINARY THINKING.
IN FACT, PORT DIRECTOR ARNOLDO CANO TOLD US THAT THE
GOVERNMENT MIGHT ALSO LOOK INTO THE POSSIBILITY OF
ALLOWING CERTAIN TYPES OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, SUCH AS
ORCHARDS, IN THE CANAL BASIS.

6. COMMENT: THE NEED FOR MAINTENANCE OF THE FORESTS
IS A FAMILIAR REFRAIN IN PANAMA. THERE IS REASON TO
HOPE THAT THE IMMINENCE OF A NEW REGIME IN WHICH PANAMA
WILL SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CANAL OPERATION WILL
FURTHER SENSITIZE THE GOVERNMENT TO THE PROBLEM AND
BRING ABOUT BETTER RESULTS. IT MUST BE ADMITTED,
HOWEVER, THAT THE POLITICAL PROBLEMS INVOLVED ARE
GREAT. PEOPLE MUST FEED THEMSELVES, AND OFTEN SLASH-
AND BURN FARMING SEEMS THE ONLY WAY. ZAMBRANO TALKED OF
A MAN IN HIS SIXTIES WHO HAD COME TO PANAMA CITY WITH HIS
FAMILY OF TEN AND FAILED TO FIND WORK. SO HE CLEARED
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AND PLANTED A PATCH OF LAND IN THE ZONE FOREST.
THIS MAN HAS TO FIND SOME WAY TO SUPPORT HIS FAMILY,
AND THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT BE DEAF TO HIS NEEDS.
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